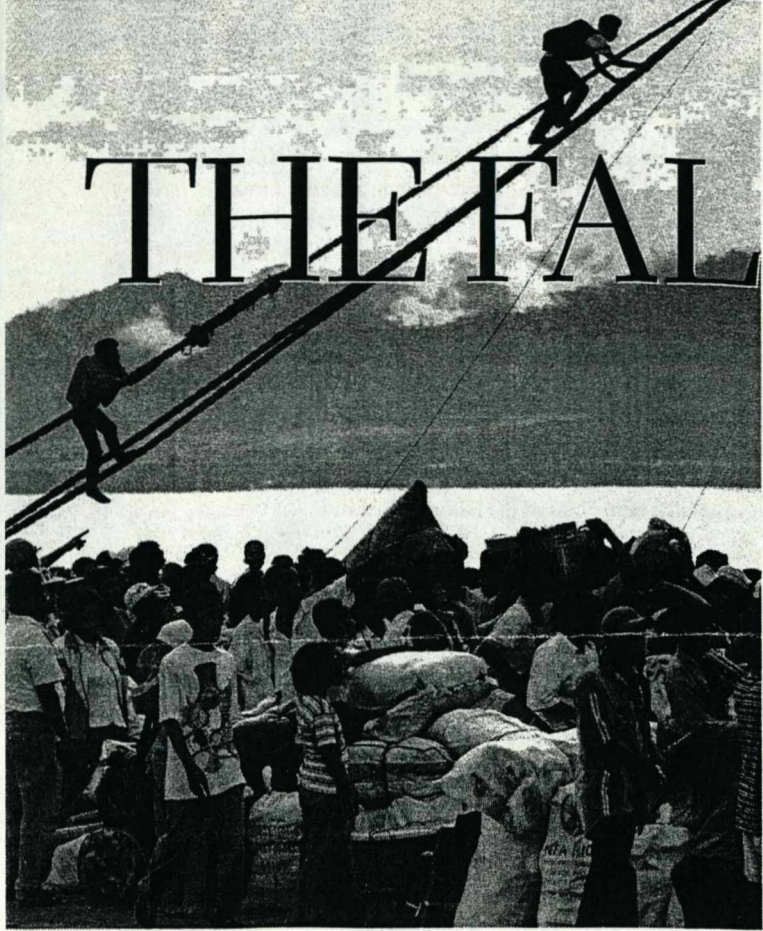




THE FALSE DAWN

Peter Carey

Alexander Solzhenitsyn's analysis of the Bolshevik Revolution has much relevance to the plight of present-day Indonesia. In Solzhenitsyn's view, the October 1917 events derailed the locomotive of Russian history, forcing the Russian people to live along the rail 'embankment' for the next seventy years. Only with the collapse of Communism in the late 1980s could the train be hoisted onto the old rail-bed once again, the engine fires relit and the passengers reembarked. Even then passage along the long neglected line would remain pitifully slow.

Photograph from AP/Charles Dharapak

IN INDONESIA'S CASE, THE EXPERIENCE OF DERAILMENT has been shorter but no less painful. Starting with President Sukarno's 'Guided Democracy' (1959-65), it continued until the collapse of Suharto's 'New Order' government (1966-98) in May 1998.

In the intervening forty years many of the historical processes which had begun to shape the young republic in the 1950s were put on hold. Most notable was Indonesia's brief experiment with multi-party democracy, as well as its attempts to find a more equitable relationship between the Javanese centre and the resource-rich 'outer islands'.

With an increasingly authoritarian government in power, backed – post-1965 – by a politically influential army and the might of the Cold War Western alliance, political and constitutional changes were put on hold. Indonesia had become a security state.

In the past year, however, since the dramatic May events, the country has appeared to be on the move once again. The 'caretaker' presidency of B.J. Habibie, has seemed to be part of this process, confounding critics who saw it as a mere continuation of Suharto's New Order.

In mid-November, a special sitting of the country's supreme representative body, the Majelis Perwusyawaratan Rakyat (MPR or People's Deliberative Assembly), made constitutional adjustments to permit multi-party elections on 7 June and presidential elections in December. These will take place under new rules of proportional representation which are more generous to the regions.

Furthermore, for the first time since independence in 1945, there will be a limit to the length of time a new president can serve (two five-year terms), and an opportunity to field multiple presidential and vice-presidential candidates drawn from those parties which have emerged strongest at the June polls.

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Even the long-running problem of the former Portuguese colony of East Timor – under illegal Indonesian occupation since 1975 – looked for a time as though it might be heading for some form of resolution.

The Habibie Government's 27 January announcement that it might grant the territory full independence should the East Timorese people reject the UN-sponsored autonomy package in a 'consultation' (referendum) scheduled for July, has given a new dimension to the long-running tripartite talks between the Portuguese, the Indonesians and the UN Secretary-General in New York.

Yet appearances are deceptive. The country's economy is still far from recovery. Indonesian Gross Domestic Product contracted by fifteen percent in 1998, the largest fall experienced by any major country since the war, and a further five percent decline is expected this year. At least a third of the eighty-eight million strong workforce are now unemployed, and an estimated half of the country's two hundred and two million people are living below the UN poverty line.

Although there are some positive developments – the government has recently been able to refinance its debt repayments at concessionary rates and a start has been made on restructuring the banking sector – the overall picture is still cloudy.

SAVAGE VIOLENCE

The combination of economic collapse and central government weakness – most evident in the increasingly factionalised and demoralised Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI – Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia) – has led to the eruption of savage ethnic and religious conflicts in places as diverse as Ambon and West Kalimantan (Borneo).

In both areas, whole communities have been torn apart as Christians have battled with Muslims, and indigenous Dayaks, Chinese and Malays have slaughtered (and sometimes cannibalised) transmigrant Muslim Madurese.

While the erstwhile New Order's ill-conceived transmigration policies, which brought 1.6 million people from heavily populated

inner Indonesia (Java, Bali and Madura) to the outer islands, certainly created the conditions for the tragedy in West Kalimantan, few could have predicted its wider impact.

Now, however, the flight of thousands of mainly Muslim refugees from outer island communities has aroused the anger of their co-religionists in other parts of the archipelago. Radical Muslim groups in Java, for example, have pledged assistance to the mainly South Sulawesi people evicted from Ambon and some have even called for a *jihad* (holy war) against local Christians.

Indeed, there are real fears that the religious conflict will spread to neighbouring islands. In the words of Sidney Jones, Director of the New York-based Human Rights Watch, the civil war in Ambon has 'ripped apart the notion of Indonesia as a society tolerant of all faiths'.¹

Elsewhere, especially in those provinces like Aceh, Riau and Irian Jaya (West Papua), where separatist movements have taken deepest hold, there is growing impatience with Jakarta. Despite vague promises that constitutional reform will be on the agenda of the next MPR which will take place between the June elections and the December presidential poll, only one major party, Amien Rais's National Mandate Party (*Partai Amanat Nasional*), has come out clearly in favour of some form of regional autonomy. Nearly all the other forty-seven parties, seem to believe that central government reform and the rebuilding of the national economy should take precedence.

Megawati Sukarnoputri, leader of the popularly supported 'struggle' faction of the Indonesian Democratic Party (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia*), the PDI-Perjuangan, has even declared that she will seek to reverse any offer of independence to East Timor should the July 'consultation' give popular sanction to this option.

With a mere seven percent of the regions' foreign exchange earnings being returned to them through central government budgetary allocations, resource-rich provinces are demanding a new deal. And they want it fast.

Fifty percent is the starting point with Riau, which has yet to reap the benefits of Batam island's tax-free zone status and its proximity to Singapore, asking for a massive eighty percent. Given the central government's current financial problems, it is most unlikely that it will accede to these requests.

However skewed the centre-periphery relationship (in neighbouring Malaysia fifty-six percent of locally raised taxes are retained by the local state governments), Jakarta simply cannot forego the huge foreign exchange revenues which flow from the outer island economies.

Aceh's exports alone, especially those deriving from her Liquid Natural Gas fields, are worth between US\$2-3 billion per annum to Jakarta, whereas the US mining company, Freeport McMoRan Copper and Gold Corporation, which operates Irian Jaya's largest copper mine, contributes nearly US\$200 million a year in corporate and other taxes to the central government and purchases goods and services worth another US\$100 million.

SEPARATIST SENTIMENT

Security concerns also weigh heavy in Jakarta. One of the principle reasons for growing separatist sentiments in both Aceh and Irian Jaya has been the 'security state' methods of the previous New Order regime. According to the Free Papua Movement (OPM or *Organisasi Papua Merdeka*), forty-two thousand of an estimated indigenous population of just over nine hundred thousand have been killed in Irian Jaya since the start of major Indonesian operations against the movement in the late 1970s.² In Aceh, human rights groups put the number of civilian and military deaths at two thousand during the

1989-92 period, when some twelve thousand troops, half of them crack units from the Strategic Army Reserve in Jakarta, turned it into a Military Operations Zone (DOM or *Daerah Operasi Militer*).³

Although this zone was rescinded in August 1998, when General Wiranto, the Armed Forces commander-in-chief, visited the province and personally apologised for ABRI's human rights violations over the previous nine years, there is little indication that the military policy of systematic terror against the civilian population has been revised. The result is that many ordinary people, who might never have dreamt of supporting the tiny Aceh independence movement, the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM), have been won over to the separatist cause out of revulsion for the behaviour of the Indonesian army.

RHETORIC AND REALITY

Nowhere is the gap between rhetoric and reality wider than in East Timor. While Jakarta talks of independence, and Portuguese and Indonesian negotiators speak of 'diplomatic breakthroughs' in New York, the army has been busy supplying weapons to civilian militias (Garda Paksi, Halilintar, Mahidi) intent on intimidating the local population into refraining from supporting the independence option.

Since October 1998, an estimated ten thousand guns have been handed out, and whole swathes of territory in the western part of East Timor have fallen under the militias' control with eighteen thousand fleeing for refuge to the provincial capital, Dili, or to local churches and the houses of wealthy Timorese.

On Easter Monday, matters came to a head with the killing of four villagers and the wounding of seven others in the vicinity of Liquiçá to the west of Dili. This incident came two days after a press conference in Dili by the general in charge of the regional military command, which covers East Timor, indicating that the army had no desire for a political settlement in the territory.

These two events sparked an immediate call by the East Timorese leader, Xanana Gusmão, still under house arrest in Jakarta, for a general popular insurrection against the militias and an end to the *de facto* ceasefire observed by the East Timorese resistance forces or *Falintil* (*Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste*). So, in East Timor, the wheel has come full circle. Indeed, barely a day after Xanana's announcement, a major new massacre occurred in the town of Liquiçá itself when over two hundred people were killed when pro-integrationist militias, backed by the Indonesian military, attacked a crowd of two thousand sheltering on church premises.

There is no doubt that a process of transition has been embarked on in Indonesia, but its outcome is still murky. The Russian parallel with which this essay began may be even too optimistic. Given the potential for ethnic and religious conflict throughout the archipelago, the example of the former Yugoslavia may be more apt. Certainly, Indonesian army actions in East Timor which have continued in Dili bring Kosovo to mind. In these circumstances, any hopes of a speedy resolution of the country's manifold problems seem unrealistic.

Barring a major disaster, multi-party elections will take place in June and a new President – probably Megawati Sukarnoputri with an ABRI Vice-Presidential running mate – will be elected in December. But, unless the underlying problems of constitutional and political reform, especially centre-outer island relations, are addressed, the new government in Jakarta will continue to preside over a nation in crisis. For Indonesia, the new millennium will not be a time of celebration. It will be a false dawn.

¹ Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong), 25 March 1999, p.30.

² Sydney Morning Herald, 30 December 1995.

³ Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong), 19 November 1998, p.25.